

Coyote Laughter

Joe Staples

THE FLASK LAY UNDER A LOOSE PLANK on the back porch. To someone lifting the board there was only an empty space, but when Wayne knelt and reached to his elbow beneath the adjacent board, he could just touch the flask with his fingertips. He uncapped it, took a quick pull on the warm Scotch, and slipped it into his shirt pocket. He stepped on the board, tamped it flush, and thought yet again that he would nail it down and throw the flask in the ditch where tomorrow's turn would wash it away. But he did not.

His old rocker sat on the porch and he eased into it, propping his feet on the rail. People looking at him for the first time would have thought him a hard man. Deep grooves framed his eyes, his face tanned to the hairline, his hair as thick now at seventy as it had been at twenty. It was lighter, though, having gone nearly white around fifty. Thin lips granted no cushion for the eye between the sharp jaw and angular nose, and a thin stubble covered his face every day but Sunday.

The big dipper tipped above his peach trees in the early evening, as if to empty itself in slaking them. Summer smells came to him from the fields—someone had cut hay today. He smoothed the hair back from his forehead and stretched his hands behind his head, let out a long breath and rolled his neck to this side, to that. Small popping of vertebrae. The warmth from the flask began to grow in his stomach. It was one of his few pleasures, he believed, and sipped again.

It always made him sad, this combination of Scotch and stars. Sad and reverent. He had read that the stars were moving further away from each other and from Earth all the time. Sometimes he wondered how much distance there had to be before distance started to matter to God. Surely he, too, had boundaries of far and near. A point beyond which he would have to say this far and no farther, or I won't hear if they do call. That God should be aware of him, in all that untellable distance, was a terrible and powerful thing. To never be free of that love or that wrath. Sometimes this certainty scared him, and sometimes the arrogance and smugness of it amused him. But it had often been of great comfort, as well. His father's father once saw Satan. Talked to him like one man talks to another. He was a missionary in the northeast when it happened. He and his companion

climbed the porch of a darkened house and found the door ajar. As they hesitated, a voice within said, "Come in, Elders." They entered and found the room dark and cold. A dampness hung in the air. A large man sat at a table. He said, "I know who you are, and I know why you're here." He had a Book of Mormon open on the table, and laid his hand on it. "I know this book is true," he said. "But I can't do anything about it." Each time he told the story, Wayne's grandfather talked of the smell inside the house. "It smelled evil," he'd say. "Just like when a ball of rattlesnakes comes outta their den in the springtime."

The man at the table called them by name and went on. "I will mow you down like hay if you stay here and preach about this book."

"My companion skedadddled," Grandfather always said, "but I didn't feel afraid. I looked him in the eye then turned and left. When I looked back, he was standing at the table just starin' at me."

Wayne accepted that evil was abroad in the Earth and knew his name. He accepted, also, that God was about, and that he, too, knew his name. He had often felt him very near. He felt him at certain places out in the fields, and sometimes when he talked to the church members in his office. But never when I ask, Wayne thought. Only when you want. The first time Wayne saw the sea—saw its gray meet the clouded horizon—he realized that the world was vast and he was nothing in it. He felt soothed to sense his own smallness and to remove himself from the center of all purpose and action. To let an Unknowable Something direct the world, the stars, the beating of his heart. He chose sometimes to call it God.

Things made the most sense to him when he was able thus to let go. The flask, his calling as Bishop, the great distances and strangeness of the world. Whenever he succeeded, even briefly, to remove himself from the equation, the broken pieces reformed themselves. He did not know another way to explain that God had called him, knowing his vice. Called him anyway. This he felt sure of. His Stake President was his friend. They had grown up together. "Well, Wayne," President Jensen had said, "it seems kinda strange askin' you these questions seein' as how I've known you so long."

"Ask," Wayne replied. "Maybe you don't know as much as you thought you did."

"Do you believe in God the Father and that His Son Jesus Christ is the savior of the world?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that Heber J. Grant is a Prophet of God and support him as Seer and Revelator?"

Wayne began to nod his head midway through the question, and President Jensen picked up his pace.

"Are you morally clean?"

"Bob, I'm sixty."

"Yes, I suppose you are. I'll take that as a 'yes.'" There was nothing unusual about the questions—predictable ones Wayne had answered perhaps hundreds of times. He had even asked them on occasion, though doing so brought sweat to his palms. The questions, he knew, were on this occasion designed to explore his worthiness to be a Bishop. "Do you obey the Word of Wisdom?" President Jensen continued.

Wayne held his gaze with effort and a pause interrupted the rhythm of the interview. "Yes," he said, asking himself, which is the bigger sin?

President Jensen paused as well, returning Wayne's gaze for a moment of silence. "All right, then. Can you think of any reason you would not be worthy to serve the Lord as Bishop?"

Wayne could think of plenty. Yes, he thought. I'm human. But he tried to lighten the tone and said, "Well, Bob, like I said—I'm over sixty." President Jensen laughed. "Yeah, Wayne. I'm sure the Lord knows that. But he's called you anyway. 'Even unto the renewing of their bodies' as the scripture says."

Called you anyway. Called you anyway. It echoed in Wayne's head like water dripping at the back of a cave. Two weeks later, Wayne was ordained Bishop of the third ward, wondering all the while what it meant that God had failed this test. Or had President Jensen failed it? Or that perhaps it was neither a failure nor a test at all, but just another web that would weave itself with or without his reckoning or permission, or even his agreement to play the part of tangled moth.

This evening on the porch, eight years later, he still did not know. He pulled on the flask, capped it, and slipped it into his pocket just as the screen opened and Ella came onto the porch. Forty-five years of marriage, many of them silent, lay behind them. She sat in the chair near his and leaned her head against its tall back.

She fanned herself with the dishrag. "Anybody goin' with you to Sevier tomorrow?"

"I asked that Sorenson boy to come along. He'll be 'round about daylight."

"Which one? Milt? Couldn't you find a grown man to go with you? Hope he likes sourdough. It's gettin' ahead of me with you not eatin' much."

"Who don't like sourdough? And he's fifteen. Been around stock his whole life."

"Their stock is dairy cows. Not beef cattle."

They rocked side by side. Did not look at each other. The coyotes yipped far out in the sagebrush.

"Looks like he'd like sourdough, 'th all the bread they eat over there. I know Melba bakes a dozen loaves twice a week."

Wayne said nothing. Everyone ate a lot of bread. And Milt was just one of Owen and Melba Sorenson's thirteen children.

"I wonder if sometimes that's all they eat?"

"Nothing wrong with that," he said. "Bread and milk and some green onion

makes a good supper."

"Alright. Just remember you said that. He know anything about bulls?"

He felt the weight of the flask in his pocket. He licked his lips. "Don't need to know much. Just need him to hold the gate."

Ella rocked faster. "Don't you go drivin' 'im with that mare. You're gettin' too old for that much horse."

"I'm not too old 'til I can't get on."

"Well, that'll be soon enough you keep ridin' like you used to. You let Milt drive 'im. You're not too old to hold the gate."

"I ain't lettin' no kid on my horse. All you got to worry about is breakfast 'fore we go. Best use that 'sparagus 'fore it gets too tough. Zucchini gettin' too big already."

"I'm 'bout zucchini'd out. That stuff just keeps comin' on."

"Land of milk and honey. And zucchini."

They stopped talking. When no grandchildren were around, silence filled the spaces between talk as easily as water runs to the level. Their chatty daughter, now grown, once asked Ella how she could stand it, not talking for hours or days. "Forty-five years, we been married," she had told her. "I guess anything we had to say, we said already. If he thinks of anything new, I reckon he'll holler." Still, they met each evening on the porch for such chat as this. And maybe that is all that should be asked of half a lifetime.

"I'm fallin' to sleep," Ella said. "Guess I'll get to bed."

"All right then. I'll set up a while. Prob'ly couldn't sleep anyway."

Ella touched his shoulder as she passed. The screen door swung to.

"Sure is a good woman." Wayne started, his eyes darting to the screen. Had he said it aloud? He was confused a moment, and knew he'd had enough Scotch.

That new bull was giving him some pains, so he drank more than usual. He bought it at a good price from Grant Hessop, on condition that he go to Sevier and bring the bull back himself. Hessop said he couldn't spare the men. "Like hell he couldn't," Wayne muttered. "Coulda hired anybody. Ornery fart just wants to put me out cause I drove him a hard bargain." And he knew the bargain had been successful because he knew too much about Grant Hessop. As Bishop, he was not only the spiritual leader of his ward, but was often a social leader and quasi-legal arbiter of disputes. Hessop had figured in many of them. Wayne once denied him a temple recommend because when he asked, "Are you honest in your dealings with your fellow men?" and Hessop answered, "Yes," Wayne knew it was a lie. It was not that the Bishop would tell anyone what he knew, but knowing gave him a certain power in Hessop's eyes.

He took a final swallow from the flask, then put it back under its board. He stepped on it to make it flush with the porch and thought about nailing the board into place. He wondered what would happen if someone found the loose board and went exploring. Scenarios played out in his mind as he imagined who would be the worst person to find the flask. A grandchild? A ward member? No, the worst would be Brother Thomas, his home teacher. Because he would feel it his

duty to help him "overcome" his problem. He imagined the subtle messages about the Word of Wisdom and obedience and Brother Thomas's sanctimonious face, heartily enjoying admonishing his Bishop.

He went in and went to bed, and sleep did come, eventually, from the Scotch and Ella's steady breath. Her back to him, he lay his hand on her hip, where it fit so well, had always fit, even as her waist thickened over the years. As he lay there, a breeze stirred the curtains, and he smelled the sage blossoms. The coyotes were still complaining out in the sage as his mind grew foggy, and he dreamed they were angels laughing and playing when God's attention was elsewhere. And in his dream, he sat on the porch with his flask and watched stars so bright they cast shadows. And as he watched, a man walked out from among the peach trees, out of the shadows like he was of their element, and stepped onto the porch and eased himself into Ella's rocker. Wayne nodded, passed him the flask. He tipped and lowered it quickly, wiped his sleeve across his mouth, shook his heavy jowls. The coyotes fell silent, the dipper tipped its contents into the orchard, light lay upon the dark surface of the world.

Milt found Wayne in the barn at dawn, scooping oats for his chestnut mare.

"Mornin', Bishop," he said.

"Mornin', yourself," Wayne said, shaking Milt's hand. "We're 'bout ready. Go 'round back and bring the truck up, so we can hitch up the trailer. Then we'll have breakfast and head out. You like sourdough?"

"Yeah."

"Figured you would." Milt brought the truck, and they hitched the old stock trailer to it. Wayne lifted the hood, climbed onto the bumper and checked the oil, filled the radiator with the garden hose. They had a breakfast of sourdough biscuits with sausage gravy, fried eggs, sliced tomatoes, cantaloupe, and cucumbers in iced vinegar. There were tomato juice and buttermilk to drink. Ella loaded Milt's plate again and again, as soon as it was nearly clean, until Wayne stopped her. "You tryin' to fatten him up for somethin'? Girls don't like too much flesh on a man." Milt laughed and blushed and could not finish the last servings Ella had given him.

They finished eating and rose, and Wayne went out to load his mare in the trailer while Milt thanked Ella ("Thank you kindly, Sister Doherty"). She gave him their lunch in a box covered with cheesecloth. "Thank you, Ma'am," he said, blushing again.

"Don't you let that old man on that horse," she said. "He falls off, he'll break 'bout everything he's got what ain't already broke."

"Yes Ma'am," Milt said. "I won't." When he got to the truck, Wayne had already got Caramel into the trailer. Bishop Doherty's horse was the object of many a covetous glance. He liked to ride her on his ditch rounds and made sure everyone got a good look at her. Sometimes he went out of his way to talk to someone changing water in the field, just so he could watch his eyes sweep over Caramel.

"Is that a lunch box?" he asked. "Told her we'd get somethin' on the road."

Milt looked down, shuffling his feet. "But I guess we'll bring it, now she went and made it. We might need it, the way you eat."

"Yes sir," Milt said, laughing.

The hour's drive to Sevier was largely quiet. They made some forays into chit-chat, but neither was very skilled, and silence was less awkward than trying to think of something to say. Finally they turned onto a dirt road and Wayne slowed, watching the fields and trees as they passed. At length he stopped. "Well, there he is," he said. A large hereford bull stood looking at them under the trees some distance from the road. It swung its great head to look into the cedars in the hills behind it, then looked back at them. "I sure hope he don't spook," Wayne said. "I'd hate to have to chase him through the cedars."

Milt cleared his throat. "I been meanin' to talk to you 'bout somethin'," he said. Wayne turned his head away, watched the bull intently. It kept turning to contemplate the thick cedars and hills behind it. Wayne wanted no part of what Milt had to say. He had heard too many teenage boys say that to him, in that pained tone of voice, much the way Milt just had. Too many adults, too, had approached him with eyes aflight—"I need to talk to you a minute." He saw his out, and took it.

"My hell, boy," he laughed. "You got nothin' to say for an hour drivin' here, and now there's work to do, you want to stop and yammer?"

Milt laughed, embarrassed. "Okay, it'll wait."

"What is it?" Wayne asked. As much as he disliked it, he knew Milt needed this talk, so he would hear it. He knew Milt had sweat and squirmed trying to screw up enough courage to say what he had just said.

Milt began to speak, but the bull saved them both. He wheeled and trotted twenty yards up the hill toward the cedars. "There he goes!" Wayne said. "Now what set him off? Soon's I get Caramel out, you back the trailer up to the loading chute." They both leapt from the truck, Wayne to open the trailer, Milt to take the driver's seat. Wayne got Caramel and his saddle and gear, and led the horse into the enclosure through the gate. He saddled her quickly and stepped up to mount, then Milt was by his side.

"Sister Doherty told me not to let you ride."

"You just get that trailer parked square with the chute."

"It's parked."

Wayne looked at the truck and trailer, backed to the stock chute and ready for the bull. "Well, you see Sister Doherty around?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Alright then," Wayne said, and lifted his foot to the stirrup. Someone must have cinched the straps because he could not get his boot high enough to reach the stirrup. He lost his balance and held to the saddle horn to steady himself. He squared his body, lifted his knee again, higher than he should have, and a crick in his hip sent a pain stabbing down to his foot. "I'll be damned," he said, his face growing red. "Come on over here and give me a hand, will you?"

Milt stepped to Caramel's shoulder, bent and locked his hands together be-

tween the ground and the stirrup. Wayne stepped into his hands, despite the pain that warned him not to, and said, "On three. One, two three!" He transferred his weight and they both grunted as Milt began to heave, but as Wayne brought up his leg to swing over Caramel's rump, his left knee buckled and he splashed to the ground, kicking Caramel as he fell. She turned to look at him on the ground and cleared her throat.

He swore through gritted teeth as the dust rose around them. "Haven't you ever hoisted a body on a horse before?" he said, the words flowing even as he regretted them.

But Milt choked down a laugh. "I hoisted just fine. Your leg give out."

"I know, damnit!" Wayne said. "Help me up and let's get her over to the fence, so I can crawl up."

"Whyncha just let me ride?" Milt asked, levering Wayne to his feet.

"Leg's numb," Wayne said as they walked to the fence. "I'll be all right once I get up on her." He led Caramel to the corner near the stock chute where the posts were low to the ground and spaced close together. He stepped onto the first rail, then the second, but could not lift his foot to the third. He panted through clenched teeth, his nostrils whistling. "Crippled ol' fart!" He looked up at the bull, milling in the cedars, measured the walking distance. Moments passed while he rubbed his numb leg and the bull meandered further away from them.

"You think you can handle Caramel?" he asked the boy.

"I guess so."

"Well, get up on her then. Don't kick her, she don't like that. All you got to do to make her go is click your tongue. And easy on the bit—she's used to a light touch."

"Yessir." Milt was already mounted, and Caramel stepped sideways under the unfamiliar weight and smell of the boy.

"Easy, girl," Wayne said, patting her neck. "Don't go directly at him or he'll run more. Circle around him up the fence-line here and get back of 'im, then just walk 'im slow toward the truck."

Milt was already going up the fence.

"Slow down," Wayne said, walking behind him. "You look like you're up to somethin'. Ride natural." Milt did not hear him or did not care, and did not slow down. Wayne looked at the bull. He had forgotten them and was grazing, so Wayne limped his way toward the chute. He leaned on a rail and rubbed his tingling leg. He watched Milt grow smaller as he rode toward the trees, riding his horse, the mare he had raised from a foal and who knew what Wayne wanted before he knew it himself. He didn't like the way Milt sat her, too upright in the saddle. Too uptight. Caramel would know he was nervous and would think it his first time; she would take the reins and ride him over the hills, him squeezing her between his thighs, hoping he didn't wet himself, and they would not be back until she was satisfied, which might be dark. "Rides like a greenhorn," Wayne muttered, massaging some feeling back into his leg. The bull was still ig-

noring horse and rider, and Milt had got into the hills behind him. Wayne limped to the truck and struggled to the seat. He wished for his flask.

From the first, Milt wasn't sure he could handle Caramel at all. She seemed anxious to break from him at every step, and his hands grew tired from a too-tight grip on the reins. His legs were tired, too, and he realized he had been squeezing his thighs, as if to hold her in check with that impotent pressure on her ribs. He forced his hands and legs to relax, and tried to loosen his back and shoulders. Caramel blew and lifted her head higher.

Milt wished they could see him now. He imagined she belonged to him, that he rode her to church and school, and brushed her coat smooth and felt her soft lips pick sugar cubes from his hands. She was pure and good; you could see it in her eyes, in the way she stood, the way she ignored stallions' attentions when they smelled her. He once heard his uncle Grant offer the Bishop \$500 to breed her to his roan stallion, but the Bishop had refused. As Grant stormed away, the Bishop caught Milt's eye and winked. Milt grinned.

"Whoa," Milt said, and reined her up gently. He looked around him and back down to the truck far down the slope. He could not see the bull, but guessed his position by where he had seen him last. The ground grew steeper ahead of him and the cedars thickened, and he hoped the bull had not gone farther up. "Where is he, girl?" he said. Caramel twisted her ears to him then dropped her head to crop the sparse grass. He clicked his tongue and cut across at a right angle from the fence he had been following. He rode a few minutes then turned Caramel down the slope, making his way toward the truck in long, indirect sweeps. At length he saw the bull close below him, looking at him between the trees.

He stopped. Bull, boy, and mare regarded one another. The bull had a large, squarish head with short horns that stood out at odd angles. His jaws worked slowly, and drool stretched nearly to the ground, swinging like a threaded pendulum whenever he moved his head. His nose shone with moisture and black flies walked in and out of his nostrils. His legs seemed too short for his massive shoulders and bulk, and his eyes stared dully at them. Beauty and the brute gazed at each other, mutually wary, the uncertain youth irrelevant between those extremes. Milt did not turn Caramel directly to the bull, but continued on his sweep hoping the bull would move slowly away from them toward the truck. But instead of turning down the slope away from the noise of the hooves, the bull turned his mass of flesh toward the horse and began to move toward them, slowly at first, then faster, intent.

Milt became nervous imagining the bull's short sharp horns buried in the flanks of the Bishop's prized mare. He waved his hat in the air and hollered at the bull as it walked, quickly now, up the slope to intercept them. "Ho! Git, you dumb cow!" The bull kept coming, gave a snort in response to Milt's voice. His tail stood erect in the air.

He had never seen a Hereford act this way, not even a bull. They were generally inert, hard to get in motion, lazy, uninterested shit machines. Was it

Caramel? The thought horrified him. Was she in heat? Would a bull act like this for the smell of a horse? He decided to try to turn the bull by riding straight at him, so he pulled Caramel's head downhill, nudging her in the ribs with his heels at the same moment he remembered Wayne's warning against kicking her.

She gave a short squeal and wheeled in the direction he reined her, but went too far and when she leapt into a run, was headed uphill into the thick cedars, away from the bull. Milt barely kept his saddle, choking the horn to stay on, then began to saw hard on the reins to turn Caramel or get her to stop. "Whoa! Ho, now!" He glanced over his shoulder to see the bull trotting toward them as Caramel sidled and jumped. "Oh, shit!" Milt said, digging her flanks with his heels. Caramel squealed again and, leaping sharply to her blind side, landed in a run. Milt's head snapped back and his hat dropped to the dust, rolling behind them as they crashed uphill through the cedars with the bull running hard behind.

Milt finally turned Caramel and she calmed down enough to begin to pick her way through the trees, so Milt no longer had to both dodge branches and try to keep his seat. He looked around him but could not see the bull. Or his hat. He patted and stroked Caramel's neck, and she slowed to a walk. He turned her down hill. The sun was high and it was hot already. The cedars smelled strong and mixed with the smells of dust and sage and horse sweat. "Is that bull after you, girl?" Milt said. The trees began to thin, and he looked down to the truck. Bishop Doherty was sitting in the shade of the trailer, leaning against the wheel. Milt's stomach grumbled. "Where's that damn cow? I'm gettin' hungry." He began to sweep again, backtracking slightly to find where the bull had turned away.

He spotted the bull just as it broke from the trees toward them, tail erect, head high. Caramel shifted her hooves and her shoulders shivered. "Easy, easy," Milt said, patting her neck. "I bet he's bluffing. Come on, you fat bastard!" he yelled. The bull stopped short and looked at them. Then it gave a long bellow and walked quickly straight toward them. Milt's hair stood on his neck. Caramel turned to glance at him, then arched her neck and flipped her muzzle, all in one motion, took the bit in her teeth, and wheeled down the hill toward the truck. Milt choked the horn again and tried to rein her up, but she held the bit and went her own way, the bull lumbering along after them. But it stopped as they neared the truck.

Wayne stood as they approached, brushing dust from his pants. "Well, that was some fine ridin', son," he said. "If you'd choked that horn any harder, you'd a broke it off." He wore a thin smile, but his jaw was tight. Milt said nothing as he slid from the saddle. He walked to the truck and drank from the water jug. "Took the bit from you, didn't she?" Wayne continued. "She must a decided she was better off 'thout you yankin' her around. I told you she liked a light touch."

"Well, it's hard to keep a light touch with a mad bull chasin' after you," Milt shot.

"Oh, he didn't mean nothin'. He's just bein' friendly. Prob'ly hasn't seen a man nor animal neither for weeks."

"Sure didn't look friendly," Milt said. He nearly asked if Caramel were in heat, but thought better of it. Wayne was not listening anyway. He had taken the saddle from Caramel's back and was rubbing her with the blanket. He led her to the trailer and reached into a bucket, drawing out a double handful of oats. She snuffed them from his hand, nickered. He bent down and took a forehoof in his hands and leaned into her until she lifted it. He inspected the shoe and hoof, cleaned debris from the frog and let it down. He checked each hoof then filled a bucket from the trailer with water. She drank long.

Milt sat in the narrow shade of the truck and drank also. The Bishop's care with Caramel embarrassed him, he felt he shouldn't be watching the scene, prayed there was nothing wrong with her hooves. What could he say? He had been given a chance every boy in the county had dreamed about and instead of acting like a man, he had nearly ruined the Bishop's horse. His neck burned and he breathed fast, splashed water on his face in case he should cry.

Wayne saw and let up. "Well, you hungry?" he asked. "We'll try the bull again later," he said but thought, I don't know how. There was no way he was letting the boy back on Caramel, and his hip and leg were growing stiffer. He took the lunch box from the truck and brought it to the shade where Milt sat with the water jug. He lifted the cheesecloth and removed hard boiled eggs, ham sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, salted radishes, and two pint jars filled with fresh peach sections and thick cream. "It's a wonder nothin' spoiled. There's just no tellin' that woman," Wayne said, laying out the food on the ground between them. He cracked an egg on a small rock and began to peel it.

"Eat up," he said. "You must 'a worked up an appetite hangin' on to that saddle."

Milt smiled and looked away, but began to eat. "Good ham," he said.

"Yeah," Wayne answered, chewing. "She was a good pig." Milt forked the peaches to his mouth with his pocketknife. The cream was thick and cool.

"Bulls are a lot like people" Wayne said. "Some of em's pretty smart, but most are dumber'n rocks. And there's mean ones and friendly ones, and the mean ones are almost always smarter'n you expect a cow to be. So since most of em are dumb, that means most of em are friendly. And that there is one dumb bull."

"How do you know he's dumb?"

"Hell, he don't even have sense to find shade. Look at 'im there." The bull stood some fifty yards from them, its tongue lolling from the effort of pulling his large form around the hillside after the horse. He stood in the sun, though shade was nearby. "Come to think of it, I've only known one smart Hereford. And he was nasty mean. Years ago."

They finished the meal in silence, and Milt began to fidget and clear his throat. Wayne stretched and sighed. "It's gonna be hard to get up now. You know, I been gettin' up early most of my life to work, usually from sunup til sundown. An' most ever' one of those long days, she's packed a lunch. I used to be the only feller on the crew who didn't have cold biscuit and bacon for lunch." He

stretched out his leg and rubbed it. He could think of nothing else to say to distract Milt from his purpose.

Milt cleared his throat once more and began to talk. "So anyways, I wanted to talk to you about somethin'."

"Oh, yeah," Wayne said with clenched teeth. "What is it?"

Milt paused and Wayne took the hat from his head, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. But before Milt could continue, the bull's large form trod once more upon that tenuous space between the resolve to speak and the utterance. "I'll be damned," Wayne said, looking past Milt up the hill. "Would you look at that!" Milt turned to look. The bull was walking steadily toward them from his sunny spot on the cedar covered hill. His head was low and his tongue was lolling, nearly brushing the ground. Thick froth hung from the corners of his mouth.

"I guess he smells our water," Milt said. "He's lookin' pretty thirsty."

"Yeah, thirst'll humble a Hereford just as quick as it will a man." Wayne watched the bull. It had stopped about thirty feet from the stock chute and regarded them dully. "I think he likes you," he said, smiling at Milt.

Looking at the boy, Wayne could see his burst of courage had left him, and that he would not again come so close to speaking out his ache.

"It's a funny thing," Bishop Doherty said. "You reckon animals got souls?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"Look at 'im there. Just another beast of the field, and dumber 'n most. But even with the finest horse in the state, we couldn't make him do what we wanted. And now here he comes all by himself, maybe cause he's thirsty, maybe lonely. Maybe cause he's just good an' ready."

Milt sniffed. "Lonely? I never seen a lonely cow."

"Well, maybe. I don't know. Can't cows get lonely? Point is, that bull came by himself when he was ready. If we had just known that, we could've backed the trailer up to the chute and kicked back 'til he showed up. Thing is, I figure God knows that about us."

"But a man's not a bull."

Bishop Doherty laughed. "I reckon you're right about that. But the Lord don't go chasin' us 'round in the hot sun, either. He calls and waits. He knows the good ones will come. Maybe take a long route and trip a lot along the way, and drink some, and whack off, but they come. And he knows it. And Milt, he knows you're a good one." The bull stood at the mouth of the chute and sniffed the cedar posts, scratched his back and neck on the rails.

"You're sayin' to not—"

The bull took a few tentative steps up the chute, stopped to look at them, then walked quickly into the trailer. Wayne struggled to his feet and pushed home the bars that would separate the bull from Caramel during the drive home. When he turned, Milt was watching him, tense, waiting.

"I'm sayin' if you ain't got nobody pregnant or shot up, then don't be too eager to confess 'You're not always gonna be runnin' 'round the hillside. And don't mistake runnin' around in the trees for smashing down the fence and gettin' lost."

They loaded Caramel and were soon on the road. The wind coming in through the open windows was a relief, both from the heat and the pressure to talk. Once again, the man and the boy were largely silent on the road. It cost too much effort to talk above the rush of wind through the cab. And anyway, what was there to say?

Milt thought of his father and thought that he now understood what it meant last spring when his father had walked up on him masturbating behind the chicken coop. It had been a cool morning, and the sun on the coop's south side warmed his skin, his pants. It must have been the warmth—the spring all around. He sat down and bared himself to the sun and his dad walked around the corner. Both were shocked mute. Both numb with embarrassment. Milt put his penis back in his pants and stood to receive whatever was coming. He expected a lecture or a lesson on morality and the law of chastity, or briefly, even a beating. But after a moment his father put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Zip yourself up, boy. We got chores." He never mentioned it again. Milt had not known what to make of it. Prob'ly wished he'd never seen it, he thought, with the Bishop beside him and the wind in his hair. Soon he dozed, dreaming of girls and horses.

Wayne stopped the truck in front of Milt's house and thanked him for coming along. "No problem," Milt said. "See you Sunday." He jumped out of the truck and walked around the corner of his house toward the back. Wayne watched him go, the long skinny neck between t-shirt and hat so like a boy's, the arms and legs long enough for a man. One leg of his pants was hung on the back of his boot, but Milt walked on, not aware or not caring that he didn't look quite the man he felt. He was fifteen and the center of the world. Wayne put the truck in gear and pulled into the street. His hip and leg were stiff and throbbing. The old truck and trailer rattled as they moved.